

"VOID - IF DETACHED"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
First Sunday In Lent  
March 11, 1984

## "VOID - IF DETACHED"

TEXT: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing"

(John 15: 5)

### INTRODUCTION

It's strange - how two events can conspire to suggest a sermon.

The first was a train ride up to White Plains back in the Fall. It was between commuter rush hours and my destination was the Conference Center in the White Plains United Methodist Church. I held in my hand one of those round-trip tickets in two detachable sections - NY to White Plains, and then the reverse, White Plains to NY. While relaxing on the train, I studied the fine print on the ticket and noticed that both sections carried this printed warning: "Void - If Detached."

The conductor came along and performed the necessary surgery of separation, but those three words lingered in my thought and prompted me to think anew about the interdependence of people and of things in our time.

### DEVELOPMENT

So many instances come to mind to illustrate the far wider application of that warning, "Void - If Detached". "Not good - if separated."

For example, what good was the train if detached from the track on which we were speeding along? Or what good was that traffic light on a nearby highway if detached from the source of electric power? Or what good was that store off in the distance if detached from the trucks that made deliveries and the farms and factories that produce the goods?

I'm sure you could come up with other examples to confirm the fact of interdependence - one thing upon another - one event waiting upon another - one person relying on another and none of them fully effective in isolation. "Void - If Detached" is what the small print on the ticket said. "No man is an island" said John Donne back in the 16th Century.

And then the second spur, if you will, to this sermon came a little later on in some lines from a book written by the late Dean Samuel Miller of Harvard Divinity School and they struck me as an exposition of the warning on the ticket. Said he,

"If we are deprived of our relationships, we are deprived of our reality. To be completely alone is to be completely null and void. The authentic nature of human reality cannot be utterly individualized. The further we tend toward the isolation of the individual, the more insupportable life becomes."

So there it was again. "To be completely alone is to be completely null and void." It's an interesting thought to play around with and when you begin to explore its possibilities, you find paths leading in different directions. Think of some of them.

### HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

First of all, think about it in terms of the whole realm of human relationships. How many words there are in our

vocabulary of diagnosis which reflect the detachment and the separation between people - words like "alienation", "estrangement", "gap", "segregation". And just think of the problems and the tensions that have resulted in so many areas of life as a result of those situations which the words describe. We were made for community, and yet at so many points we are eyeing one another across gulfs of suspicion and mistrust.

There is a way in which a person is void if detached from a family. A young person may decide that he doesn't need his family...that he's the master of his fate and the captain of his soul, and that he can get along without the signals and the signs and the supportive strengths from those in his home. And certainly part of this is perfectly normal and natural and necessary - the steps toward selfhood, and the move toward maturity in life. Only this....when a young person comes into real maturity and assuming that he has come from a real home - then he knows he's in debt to that home and he is not so insistent upon his independence.

Or, again, there is a way in which a person is void if detached from his friends. Think about the application of this warning and ponder how different and how destitute our lives would have been without the influence of our friends - their support, their encouragement...at some of the turns in the road we have travelled. The script differs with each of us, but it is a poor and pathetic life that cannot see the places at which friends have made the difference.

And think of some of the other paths that we could take in opening up the truth of these words. It has something to say to so many of the gaps that are evident in our time. The generation gap. It should never be one generation pitted against another, for either is incomplete if isolated from the other. Youth is like a tree without roots if it cannot learn from the experience of elders. Age is like a tree that has been winter-killed, if it cannot learn from forward looking young people. Each generation needs each other.

Or, take the gulf between the races, or the gulf between urbia and sub-urbia. Beware of trying to live in isolation, as though the other half simply does not exist, for with races and regions, as with many a popular contest, we need that "other half" in order to win "big".

#### OUR TASK THEN

Our task is not to draw ourselves apart in detached and rigid exclusiveness. Our task is to become skilled architects and engineers of bridges that span the chasms between generations, between the races, between regions and nations and churches and creeds - understanding for ourselves personally and collectively the great urgency of that simple warning on the ticket.

In January we celebrated Martin Luther King's birthday and I was reminded of something he expressed so eloquently in a sermon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine here in the city back in 1966. I was there the night he said this.

"No individual" he said, "can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood. We must all learn to live together as brothers. Or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

And whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

And certainly one cannot help but feel the urgent truth of those words on the ticket, "Void - If Detached" for the Churches - and for the traditions and the denominations they represent.

I think that more and more we sense that we cannot continue to go our own separate ways...for the world, and especially for us, the city, are too strong for a divided Church. We are growing in our realization that the walls that have divided us as traditions and denominations do not reach up to heaven, and that the things that have separated us are not as strong and compelling as those things that unite us as Christians. We see more and more that the future agenda of the Christian enterprise rests with attachment and not detachment.

We've met each other in local hospitals, in soup kitchens and shelters. We have prayed together, acknowledging that the God who calls us to the hospitals and the soup kitchens and pantrys and shelters is also calling us to "be one... that the world may believe". Indeed, we have discovered that we can experience unity even in our diversity and as we come together, we find ourselves drawing strength from each other. There is hope in this and praise the Lord for it.

#### HIGHEST SPIRITUAL MEANING

Suppose we consider now the highest spiritual meaning of this phrase. We call to mind some words spoken by our Lord, Jesus Christ, to His disciples in the Upper Room on the last night of His life as He shared the Last Supper with them.

"Apart from Me, you can do nothing at all. I am the vine, you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. It is the man who shares My life and whose life I share who proves faithful."

Gathered around Him that night were men who knew perfectly well what He was talking about - for they were living testimony to that truth. Lives that had been pretty well withered and worn until He came along, shared His life with them and in so doing put meaning and strength into them. There, in the corner, was Matthew with a record as a crafty, crooked tax collector, until one day the Master met him and opened the door to change with those words, "Follow Me". And Peter - close by - as profane and temperamental a fisherman who ever fished on the Sea of Galilee, until one day he responded to a voice that said, "Follow Me, and I will make you a fisher of men."

And somewhere in the background that night, Mary Magdalene, who was respected by no one including herself, until a day when the Man from Nazareth led her to understand that there might be forgiveness for the past and some meaning for the future. Those who were with Him that night recognized the scenery when Jesus used the metaphor of the "vine and the branches" - and they could tell us something of the spiritual meaning of the tax on our ticket, "Void - If Detached".

The words of Jesus are relevant and needful. "Apart from Me you can do nothing at all" - and yet - we're forever trying...forgetting and forsaking the life of the spirit and the spirit of His life. One thinks of those - scores of people - who have drifted away from Him, forgotten Him, who neglect the living, vital center

of belief. Drop outs from the Church...drifters from Christ. Their lives could mean so much more if only they were attached, tied in in earnest about these matters of which we speak.

EVERY NOW AND THEN

Every now and then, something or someone brings us up short and reveals the real thing to us - a life really lived in the Christ-spirit, a life really attached to Him and reflecting that personal relationship and that spirit so naturally in the world. Some "fool for Christ's sake" investing His life in some dark, difficult place. Some person coming through controversy and criticism with a glad and gracious spirit. Some person coming through trials and troubles with steady strength. Some person standing up for ideals and convictions with quite courage.

And then it is that we are reminded that there is a "present power" - enough to renew hope and inspire us to a deeper commitment. There is still a living spirit of God meeting us in the person of Christ that can and does make a difference in human life - how ones sets his goals, how one deals with trouble, triumph and temptation, how one regards other people...how one regards himself, how one lives and how one dies.

Jesus was underscoring the warning on that simple train ticket when He spoke that lifting word to His disciples as they shared in the Last Supper and who knows...perhaps there is some one person present this hour who needs to hear these words and come in from the cold and be warmed by His love - a love that embraces all mankind.

"Apart from Me you can do nothing. I am the vine and you are the branches. The one who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off...and withers away".

PRAYER

Speak to us, O God, in the hush and quiet of these moments. Remind us that we were never meant to be utterly alone. Restore us where we are broken, separated and then strengthen us in that companionship with Christ that His life and love may be in us and flow from us to others. Forgive us for those times in life when we get cut-off from friends, from family and from You and forget what You have done for us and bring us "back home". In Christ's name we pray. Amen

INTRODUCTION

It is a joy to be with you this morning...to have the opportunity to share in your observance of The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and to celebrate with you on this Christian Unity Sunday.

The warmth of your welcome has already made me feel very much at home.

And I'm pleased that your Pastor, Raymond Schulze, is preaching this hour in the pulpit of the Park Avenue United Methodist Church.

I see that two weeks from today you will be celebrating the 118th anniversary of this congregation. I wish you a very happy anniversary.

I was thinking earlier this morning that if you were to add up together the total number of years that our two churches have been serving in the name of Jesus Christ in this community....you would have 262 years! Chances are that this is the first time that our two churches have shared in a pulpit exchange or in any type of program aimed at helping us to get to know each other better.

I think this sort of thing is a definite plus.....long over-due. And I personally rejoice in a Sunday such as this and have a feeling that your beloved Pastor does also. The purpose of a morning like this is to bring a greater sense of unity among our congregations and to remind us of our unity in Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Let us pray.

"Help us, Lord, to be master of ourselves so that we may become the servants of others. Take our lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen"

TEXT FOR THE SERMON

The text for today's sermon is taken from that portion of Scripture listed in the bulletin. John

15. Verses 1 - 11.

The fifth verse is the Word from the Gospel that I would put before you in the way of a text. Let me read it:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"

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DEVELOPMENT So many instances come to mind to illustrate the far wider application of that warning, "Void - If Detached". "Not good - if separated".

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So there it was again. "To be completely alone is to be completely null and void". "Void - if detached". It's an interesting thought to play around with and when you begin to explore its possibilities, you find paths that lead in different directions.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS First of all, think about it in terms of the whole realm of human relationships. How many words there are in our vocabulary of diagnosis which reflect the detachment and the separation between people - words like "alienation", "estrangement", "gap", "segregation". And just think of the problems - the tensions - that have resulted in so many areas of life as a result of those situations which the words describe. We were made for community, and yet at so many points we are eyeing one another across gulfs of suspicion and mistrust. One does not have to go very far to find tragic human proof of the validity of the warning on the ticket.

There is a way in which a person is void if detached from a family. A young person may decide that he doesn't need his family...that he's the master of his fate and the captain of his soul, and that he can get along without the signals and the signs and the supportive strengths from those in his home. And certainly part of this is perfectly normal and natural and necessary - the steps toward selfhood, and the move toward maturity in life. Only this....when a young person comes into real maturity and assuming that he has come from a real home...then he knows he's in debt to that home and he is not so insistent upon his independence.

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temptation, how one regards other people...how one regards himself..how one lives and how one dies.

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"Apart from Me you can do nothing. I am the vine and you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off...and withers away".

PRAYER God, Our Father, there are those times in life when we get cut-off and find ourselves in isolation from family, from friends, from our fellow man and even from Christ and from what You have done for us in Him.

Remind us in these moments that we were never meant to be utterly alone. Restore us where we are broken, separated and strengthen us in that companionship with Christ that His light and love may be in us and that it may flow from us to others, all in His name and spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand.

May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life and may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding presence. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, saith your God. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: we are forgiven."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing... you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole"

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to You on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

Hilda Thomas

Sara Bradshaw

Muriel Ortbal - mother of Judy

Anna - mother of Sandra Trout

Helen Breit

Randy - sister of Avion

Spencer Brayton

Elizabeth Paton - daughter of Nancy

## INTRODUCTION

It is a joy to be with you this morning....to have the opportunity to share with you in your observance of this New York Annual Conference Ethnic Pulpit Exchange.

The warmth and graciousness of your welcome has already made me feel very much at home, as it has several members of my own parish who have come along with me today.

I would like to introduce them to you.

And I'm pleased that your pastor, Dr. Nathaniel T. Grady, Sr., is a guest in the Church of which I am pastor - the Park Avenue United Methodist Church.

This is the first time that our two churches have shared in a pulpit exchange or in any type of program aimed at helping us to get to know each other better.

I feel it's a good thing....certainly a step in the right direction. The purpose of a morning like this is to bring a greater sense of unity to our Methodist family....to remind us of the unity we share in Jesus Christ. Let us praise the Lord for it as we unite together in prayer.

## PRAYER

"Help us, Lord, to be master of ourselves so that we may become the servants of others. Take our lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen"

Treasurer of the Board of Trustees: Larry Morales  
President of the UMW: Mary Lou McGanney  
Chairperson: Council on Ministries  
Valued member of Finance Committee: Kathy Buck  
Valued Member of the Church: Coralie Bailey

Tried to reach Dr. Grady....around 9 this morning to welcome him....got Glouster Current....He said, "Great People...good congregation." Wish I could be there with you.

ASTORAL PRAYER: March 11, 1984

MAKE US sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and Your presence in these quiet moments. Remind us, once again, "that more things are wrought by prayer than this world has ever dreamed."

Here we would lift up our hearts unto You, O God - Father and Mother of us all. We come seeking faith and courage, peace and light and strength..."for the living of these days".

patience ..  
perspective

SO OFTEN, under the stress and tension of this life in this great city, we find ourselves yielding to selfish ease and to mean ambition. We become entangled so easily with the things of earth that we end up losing a sense of life's simplicity and nobility.

Help us to set our affections on things "above" that we may let go of those nagging doubts and gnawing fears that can cripple a soul and destroy a life.

Here - for a few brief moments on this Lord's Day - we would "center down", look up and see life from higher ground.

FORGIVE US, LORD - each of us - for the unkind words that we may have spoken in anger this past week...for the hurt that we needlessly may have caused...for the careless way we handle our precious human relationships.

We would not be weary in our well-doing. With Your help we would be faithful to the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us, and loyal to those commitments we have made. Deepen our commitment to Christ. And,

Remind us - as we worship YOU - that we cannot fellowship with You if in our hearts we reject, or neglect our brother or sister who is in need. And so we pray for those who have never really had a chance in life - the hungry, the hurt, the homeless, the helpless.

We pray, too, for the person who sits near us or next to us in the pew this hour. The person....to our left...to our right.

HELP US to remember that life is a precious gift. Help us to use it wisely...help us to remember that love heals, hate destroys, trust strengthens, distrust weakens. Now -

Fortify our spirits. Enlighten our reason. Elevate our aims. Let our ideals pervade our thoughts. Flood our hearts with peace.

ALL THIS WE ask in the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Master and Saviour...in whom we see life's highest hope and its deepest meaning.